

Uncovering Aspects of a Human Utopia in Quentin Compson of “The Sound and the Fury”

Dr. Dalila Karakaçi

Department of English and American Studies Faculty of Foreign
Languages “Luigj Gurakuqi” University, Shkoder
karakacidalila@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The main aim of this paper is to explore aspects of a human utopia in the character of Quentin Compson, in the novel “The Sound and the Fury”, by William Faulkner. Quentin is the older brother of the Compson Family and the most tragic individual of this novel. His appalling fate is a result of the incompatibility to suit the new reality of norms and values in the 20th century America. By building a utopia on the cultural values of the past, he arrives to capture himself in a life full of absurdity. Family pressure, norms, ethical codes, along with the moral standards, plays an essential role in his utopia. Just like every inhabitant in South America, Quentin finds himself within two standards society: a knightly and a Victorian one. In front of the reader it is exposed a meaningless reality, of a young man searching for himself, while fighting with time and his demons. The technical devices for building the figure of Quentin are achieved through a double dimension of conflict and desire, where this character is uncovered by a combination of vertical and horizontal overview.

Through an empirical analysis of Quentin, I will arrive to the point to evaluate the alternative reality of a man like him and indirectly present features of the modern American society, at the beginning of the 20th century, conditioning him.

Keywords: *Utopia, Quentin, codes of honor, Puritanism, moral values*

Development of Utopian Literature during Modernism

The manifestation of utopian ideas generated the utopia literature. This literature is based on the formation of an ideal social organization, reflecting the personal concern of different authors on specific social developments, but even prevailing attitudes in particular historical and social periods of humanity. The word utopia takes even a political and historical connotation within the context of multiculturalism, where an

ideal society exists through the collaboration between individuals of dissimilar identities and cultural backgrounds.

The impulse to build a more positive and ameliorating world is at the center of utopian ideas, exposed during modernism. Modernist writers believed that technology brings the transformation in a society, not underestimating the utopia that art is responsible for the modification of such society. The consequences of WWI helped wide spreading the utopian ideas through the belief that the world could change and ameliorate from the larger influence of art. Even modernism was born as a multiple artistic, literary etc. movement thinking that the world could be transformed, reorganized, and reframed. During modernism were born some utopian concepts inspired by different perspectives on life improvement.

Because of a new reality, where the societies at the beginning of the 20th century were encouraged by social movements and technological developments, the intellectuals started to produce a deeper thought on the political, social and structural consequences of these changes. The uncertainties over men's role in this new society, even as part of suspicions on technology, were seen from the positive and negative perspective. These social reactions, within the literary context, were manifested in the utopian literature. Modernist utopian literature, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is different from other previous periods because of historical, social and cultural variations. If at the center of every utopia is the separation and division from the past, the same hostility is at the center of modernism. As a result, modernism created a break from the structural organization of all pre industrial societies. These divisions hide a utopian idea to create a perfect society, but from a new perspective, distinctive from the previous ones. The creation of this ideal organization would help modernism highlight the negative aspects of this period. While comparing the utopian ideas exposed before and after modernism, we could judge on their evolution and change. While writing on the book of Tomas Moore, Ogden (1949) declares that "*utopia, in itself, is a book on ethics. Utopia is an effort to project the ethical values of Christianity in a real social system*" (p. ix). This means that utopia before modernism is within a moralist context. Frederick Jameson (2004) exposes a completely new perspective in his article "Political Utopia", while saying that "*the proposal of Marx does not include a concept of human nature; it is not even essential or psychological; it does not have passions, sins like lust for money, greed, or proud. That of Marx is structural diagnosis*" (p. 4). As a result, utopia, during modernism was conceived as a structural change.

Faulkner in the Context of Utopia

A survey of utopia as a philosophic phenomenon is essential to the understanding and interpretation of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which reflects the philosophic concept of utopia. Every literary period has its manifestation of literary utopia, starting from a literature that is fully utopian to one that shows its elements of utopia in every period. Even the period of modernism represents its elements of utopia, which are compared to the other expositions of this literary trend. The approach to utopia, as a literary phenomenon, has helped me to define important characteristics in the novel. A detailed study of the characters, together with the components of the poetry, reveals the utopia to the readers. Modernist poetics has oriented me toward the utopian context, because the main aim is its analysis within the modernist literary movement.

In his Nobel Price Speech, in 1955, Faulkner says “*I decline to accept the end of man*”(Stein, 1960, p.67-82). The decline of this apocalyptic moment is an indication where we can find a utopia of human beings, a utopia of living, filtered through the action of the characters and experimenting narrative styles. Faulkner is at the point where literature and history are terminated. Being a typically modernist work, it passes through “*an aesthetic ordering*,” (p.481) which according to David Lodge (1991) uses “*allusion to or imitation of literary models, or mythical archetypes; or repetition-with-variation of motifs, images, symbols*” (p.481). Such narrative method was named “*the method of myth*” by T.S. Elliot (1923), inspired by Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), even though he used the same technique in his *Waste Land* (1922). What surprised Elliot was “*the usage of Odysseus’ myth... as a manner to put order, give form, meaning to the endless panorama of futility and anarchy in contemporary history.*” (p.483). I have come to the conclusion that the utopian elements, in this novel, are precisely expressed through the usage of myth.

Something typical of Faulkner’s utopia is that he employs even the motif of erotic sublime. The usage of a motif based on nymphs serves his sublime. Such technique is observed in all his novels, starting from the earliest one to *The Sound and the Fury*. In a period of social changes, where the differences between gender identity and gender role were fading away, Faulkner tried to enforce the distinction between masculinity and femininity. His utopia is expressed through an unreachable ideal. While searching for it, an inexhaustible source in his imaginary pursuit and medieval fantasies are even the romantic poets and writers such as Keats, Yeats, Boulder, Mallarme etc. The pastoral element is another way to further investigate his utopia. The characters in *The Sound and the Fury*

resemble to be trapped within imaginary gardens. If at the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury* the pastoral element served as a manner to foil the time and different developments, it also worked to find the green surface under which abounds the historical and social nightmares of humanity.

Quentin Compson's Human Utopia

Quentin is the oldest son of the Compson family, but also the most tragic character in the novel. This tragedy is born as a consequence of some incompatibilities, between the new reality and norms, in the American society at the beginning of the 20th century. Educated with outdated values and norms, he loses himself in those old values, while being unable to adapt to the American society's new reality. Creating a utopia upon the past cultural values, Quentin, traps himself in a life of absurdity within a society he rejects. Educated in a noble family, descendant of three generals and a governor, he had to confront a destroyed nobility where the father is a typical example. Mr. Compson experiences the fall of the social system he was part. A representative of the cotton plantations owners, he witnesses his country being involved in the Civil War, while its consequences collapse the old economic, social and political system. Even though he does not believe anymore in life, the people, and the future, Mr. Compson makes such materialistic declarations as "*men are just accumulations*" (p.218). Mr. Compson does his utmost to adapt his children to the new reality that is against the nobility's ideas, upon which was based the whole long philosophy of his family tradition.

Quentin forms his utopia not just on his father's family pressure, but even on the ideas nourished by the mother. Of a family background simpler than Mr. Compson, Mrs. Compson is part of the middle strata society, always underneath the pressure of important family plantations. The only way to compensate this social, economic and politic inferiority was to inflict to the new after war society through religious devotion. The devotion along with the morality and honesty of Victorian society is a manner to give credit to this lower class. The same behavior is evident in Mrs. Compson, while educating her children under strict norms and ethical codes. Under the same influence is even Quentin. His utopia is built upon strict social rules and ethical norms.

Like all South American inhabitants, Quentin finds himself within two ways of society organizations: a chivalry and a Victorian one. His generation would suffer the 19th century strong social and cultural heritage. His family heritage would, without doubt, be reflected in a utopia based on

these norms, avoiding every other possible interpretation. A society is bent in two by his norms, because of the changes it was experiencing. As a result of the Civil War and the consequences generated by this new reality, Quentin finds himself divided between the spiritual and terrestrial living. The spiritual living was based on ideals of honor, virtue, human and spiritual beauty. The terrestrial living was based on the human spiritual and physical alienation, in addition to corruption. Typical for Quentin is that till the end of life he will defend the moral worldview. Under the imminent pressure of family moral, social, and cultural heritage, he dedicates to keep the family and himself under that part of morality representing this heritage. His utopia is based on these thoughts.

Following this logic, Quentin comprehends the defense of his family honor to be the most significant issue. This virtue surpasses the temporary time-space, taking a lifelong immunity and idealism beyond human control. Contrary to his father, who tries to adjust to the 20th century reality and help the son do the same, Mr. Compson says *"you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh"* (p.220). In his mind is created a utopia based on existence spiritual morality, repudiating every other fantasy or imagination on society development, and mainly, on family rules. I am of the opinion that Quentin is consistent with the reality described by his father, but entrapped in it without a spiritual vision. He lacks the same backbone to defend himself from the double realism in every life aspect. Whereas projecting a utopia on the ideals of life, such double thought rocks his spirit. Under the influence of a common reality, removing him away from his ideal society generates an unbearable psychological condition in Quentin. The inability to confront such situation produces an extreme condition: his suicide.

The creation of a utopia on some moral values has its influence even in the sexual life. According to James Cowan (1990), *"Love is linked with the saintly ideal and sex with the destructive animality"* (p. 94-95). In Quentin's eyes the sexual activity is considered as a perversion of noble morality. The only way to be morally clean in a society altering its norms, including the sexual perception, was to be physically pure. The physical purity compensates the moral and mental purity of a young boy coming from a family of noble traditions. The pressure of cultural codes within a pre Civil War society has projected a utopian image over every gender role. The same pressure is found in Quentin. The character presentation in the context of narratological structures present him as a symbol of typification. According to his projection, females play their roles of innocent or impure creatures, while the males play the role of logic and control. They are

responsible for putting order in the society, but also controlling time, while the females represent the inappropriate society phenomena, the irregular flow of time, but the fascination towards them seems unavoidable, being a prey of their physical and emotional temptation. In his portray of women, are clearly perceived fascinating aspects, and doubled by a dualistic mind, taking a magnificent connotation, but even fear-provoking, of a physical attraction as well as a driving force. In one of his inexhaustible flows of thoughts, that are abound in the whole episode, expressed through the stream of consciousness narrative technique, Quentin says,

Because women so delicate so mysterious Father said. Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced. Moons lie said full and yellow as harvest moons her hip thighs. Outside outside of them always but. With all that inside of them shapes an outward suavity waiting for a touch to. Liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up. (p.119)

In a period of sexual awareness, different from that of the 19th century, Quentin finds himself prey of sexual instincts, which he tries to hide, but they become powerful, dominating his being, as *the smell of the honeysuckle* (p.117) dominates the whole environment. These images are not part of his everyday reality. His sexual utopia on males and females is completely different from the 20th century reality. Even though a fervent admirer of the techniques males use to capture the females' attention, he is convinced that none does fulfill the ideal of a male since they infringe the noble morality. According to James Cowan (1990) "*these males achieve their masculine virility at the expense of the finer qualities that would make them fully human*" (p.94-95).

In his utopia, Caddy, the sister, plays a crucial role. As the pure human existence must be based on the moral and beauty virtues, Caddy's physical purity is an essential morality element, not just for her, but because on this purity was even based a whole family moral utopia, which must be left untouched. Contrary to his brother, Caddy has an active sexual life, representing the new society view. She is a woman outside Quentin's traditional morality perception. If he changes her morality, he will be able to defend and leave inviolate the whole morality of Compson's family. This idea involves him in a close relation with her sister, as to allude for an incest relation. Many of his stream of consciousness monologues are referred to Caddy, where through the dramatic characterization; the view is put on the inner side of the characters to show the tumultuous spirit. This technique influences on the coming events. Even Quentin's fantasy is so

wide as to puts himself in the place of Caddy's boyfriends while saying "...I'll make you you know we did you thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house where that damn honeysuckle trying not to think the swing the cedars the secret surges the breathing locked drinking the wild breath the yes Yes Yes Yes" (p.185).

At this point, comes to existence Quentin's imperceptible side, that of a hidden sexual alienation. This perversion does not change much from the other males' perversions, as to make him break the rules of the idealized morality. However, the projection of his fantasies is directed to Caddy, due to a close connection they have, but primarily because every fantasy projection, within a sexual context, will remain just a fantasy. At this point Andre Bleikasten (1974) notes "*taking into consideration his perverse needs this is a perfect arrangement*" (p.108). These needs will never become a reality. In a second episode, after Caddy consumes her physical relation with Delton Ames, Quentin finds himself lying with her next to a stream. After understanding what she had been doing, Quentin tries to convince her escape together. When the emotional turmoil reaches the climax comes the idea of committing a suicide, for both of them. The first emotion pervading his mind is defending her, although this emotion is surrounded by other perverse forbidden feelings between a brother and sister. This emotional initiation must be analyzed within the context of a normal man as Quentin. The artistic discourse is full of sexual connotation:

Im stronger than you

She was motionless hard unyielding but still

I wont fight stop youd better stop

Caddy dont Caddy (p.191)

In another episode, put in the light of different interpretations, he confesses Mr. Compson to have an incest relation with Caddy. In the context of different interpretations, I think that this action serves his utopia. Through it Quentin creates an imaginary reality serving as a saving alternative for the image of Caddy and his family. In an imaginary reality, there are no more Caddy's lovers; moreover, her reputation in Quentin's eyes remains undamaged. This utopian reality helps hide Caddy's pregnancy and restore her physical purity. In an imaginary dialogue, Quentin begs her to invalidate a marriage urged by compulsion to defend her morality and that of the whole family. Impelling his imagination on incest relation, Quentin hopes to save his sister from the actual situation. He begs her "*Why must you marry somebody Caddy Do you want me to say it do you think that if I*

say it it wont be” (p.151). From his words it is understood that Quentin’s desire is not to reach a physical incest with Caddy, save for expressing it, articulating it as part of his imagination. To the same extent Olga Vickery (1959) notes that turning his fantasy into reality would destroy things “*by involving him in the terrible reality of experience*” (p.188-89). They are those experiences that Quentin himself attacked and did not agree. They were part of the new world, he could not understand and approve. The idea to communicate the world this uncommon brotherly relation could serve him as a manner to find the interior strength and to face his existential reality.

This reality, ostensibly meaningless, is of a young man looking for himself while fighting against time and his demons. His character presentation in the context of narratological structure is achieved through a double dimension of conflict and desire, where the inner self of the character is uncovered through a vertical and horizontal viewpoint. Regrettably, Quentin’s attempt to revolt and find the right way for himself remains part of an alternative reality. The incongruity with the actual truth and the formation of another alternative produces his suicide. Therefore, the idea of incest serves to create a multidimensional utopia of Quentin’s existence. Constance Hall (1983) is of the opinion that “*What Quentin yearns for is an angelic- pure, unbounded, unimpeded the near perfect vehicle for (his) effort to possess absolutely and to achieve complete oneness*” (p.134). The affection toward Caddy is not just a feeling between a sister and brother, more than that, her figure in Quentin’s eyes is symbolically a substitute for his mother’s love. Mother’s missing love was ready to be compensated by Caddy in a full, unconditional, and safe manner. The inclusion in such emotional and pure sensation, unconditioned and full, is part of the imagined reality.

At the end of the episode, during a long stream of consciousness monologue, as a summary of all life dynamics, Quentin refers to a last utopian dream from childhood memory. Through the technique of compositional overturn, Faulkner puts in flashback a scene from the past, while emphasizing the emotional aspect in the novel, but at the same time showing the intimate part of the character. Such technique moves the center of attention in the past and future. Quentin tells that,

It used to be I thought of death as a man something like Grandfather a friend of his a kind of private and particular friend like we used to think of

Grandfather's desk not to touch it not even to talk loud in the room where it was I always thought of them as being together somewhere all the time waiting for old Colonel Sartoris to come down and sit with them waiting on a high place beyond cedar trees Colonel Sartoris was on a still higher place looking out across at something and they were waiting for him to get done looking at it and come down Grandfather wore his uniform and could hear the murmur of their voices from beyond the cedars they were always talking and Grandfather was always right. (P.218-19)

This boyish dream represents his utopia based on South America's chivalry ideals. That higher place in the middle of the trees defended the strict morality of a society represented by Colonel Sartoris, where his judgments on morality were always right, indisputable and not threatened by the society. Nevertheless, in the existing society, these ideas are transformed into myths by the reality. Building his utopia upon a myth, pertaining to a cliché on some strict rules out of the new historic reality, makes Quentin feel lost. Life in this alienating reality, according to the rules and norms of a chivalry one is present in every moment, from the debates with Gerald Bland, Delton Ames to Caddy. In a modern culture, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was no place for an unusual reality of a man like Quentin, whose noble values were based on the honour codes and Puritanism.

Conclusions

In this novel, Faulkner tries to give the reader all the dimensions of Quentin's character, his dualistic mind and confrontation between reality and fantasy, responsible for his suicide. The author sheds lights on unusual experiences over living the character of a conservative society under new economic, historic, and social progress at the beginning of the 20th century. The action exposed in his episode is within a single day, where his physical and emotional condition is responsible for Quentin's stream of consciousness. A social utopia upon the viewpoint of certain moral judgments has its influence even in the intimate life. Quentin believes the sexual activity to be a noble moral judgment perversion. The single possibility to be morally and physically pure, in a society altering its norms, even the social ones, was to be physically pure.

References

- Bleikasten, A. (1974). *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cowan, J. (1990). Dream Work in Quentin Section. In Andre Bleikasten (Ed.), *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novel from the Sound and the Fury to Light in August*. (pp. 94-95). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Elliot, T.S. (1923). Ulysses, Order, and Myth. *Dial*, 75.
- Faulkner, W. (1990). *The Sound and the Fury*. New York, NY: Vintage International.
- Hall, C. (1983). *Incest in Faulkner: A Metaphor for the Fall*. Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press.
- Jameson, F. (2004). The politics of Utopia. *New Left Review*, 25, 4.
- Kumar, K. (1987). *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ogden, H.V.S. (1949). Introduction. In T. Moore, *Utopia* (ix). Arlington Heights.
- Stein, J. (1960). William Faulkner: An Interview. In F.J. Hoffman and O.W. Vickery (Eds.), *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*. (pp.67-82). New York: Hartcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Viera, F. and Freitas, M. (2005). *Utopian Matters. Theory, Politics, Literature and the Arts*. Porto: University of Porto.
- Vickery, O. (1959). *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*. Louisiana: Louisiana University Press.